

PERFORMANCE 1

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Chapter 1: Intro to Guitar Performance

Perhaps no instrument has had a more profound impact on the music of the 20th and 21st centuries than the amplified solid-body guitar, commonly known as the electric guitar. For the past several decades, the electric guitar player has been the primary sonic architect of most popular music forms, from Chuck Berry's honky-tonk-piano-inspired double stops in the 1950s, to the later innovations of players like Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eddie Van Halen and The Edge, and continuing up to the modern sounds of bands like Metallica, Megadeth and Avenged Sevenfold.

The modern guitarist is faced with the daunting yet rewarding task of understanding and assimilating the instrument's storied history and vocabulary and embracing its myriad roles in modern music. These include, but are not limited to, functioning as a source of primary chordal accompaniment and structure, being a featured improvisational solo instrument, working with the rhythm section to establish the foundation and groove of the music, and utilizing electronic effects to create sound textures within the music. The electric guitarist of today is often an artist leading his/her own group (either with or without vocals), or a featured sideman in one of many possible musical situations. Whatever the circumstances, today's working electric guitarist needs to possess many skills, such as the ability to provide solo accompaniment to singers, write out charts, structure arrangements, conduct, assume the role of bandleader, sideman, session musician or pit orchestra performer.

Certainly, fluency in the many disparate styles and sounds that fall under the rubric of modern electric guitar playing is essential to the aspiring professional performer.

Chapter 2: Getting Your Sound

Let's begin our exploration of electric guitar performance with an examination of the basic **signal chain**. Simply put, the signal chain is that path sound travels from the time the guitar strings are struck until that sound vibration is reproduced and amplified by a speaker. The signal chain may be as simple as a guitar plugged directly into a small combo amp via a 6.3mm (more commonly called a 1/4") mono cable. The 6.3mm/1/4" measurement refers to the diameter of the input jack. 1/4" cables are usually anywhere from eight to 20 feet in length. The signal chain may also include multiple rack-mounted or floor-situated tone-altering devices called effect pedals or stomp-boxes. Every part of the signal chain affects the tone in some way.



Fig. 1.1 The ends of 1/4" instrument cables made by Monster.

THE PLECTRUM

Although some electric guitarists opt to play solely with the fingers of their picking hands (Mark Knopfler of the band Dire Straits is one example), the majority articulate sound with a plectrum, commonly known as a **pick**. Pick selection is a highly personal choice—Queen's Brian May uses a British coin called a shilling as a pick, while U2's The Edge flips his West German-made Herdim picks upside-down to scratch the strings with the bumpy raised grip surface for a raspier tone. However, most guitarists opt for picks of standard size and thickness. Pick thickness (also known as gauge) is often measured in millimeters. Picks that are .06-1.00mm in thickness are good for general purpose playing. Also, picks that are made of nylon or Tortex tend to be easier to grip and wear out less frequently.



Fig. 1.2 Dunlop Tortex picks of varying thicknesses. Tortex material was developed as an alternative to picks that were made of tortoise shells.

THE GUITAR

There are countless makes and models of electric guitars, but most will essentially fall into one of two categories:



Fig. 1.3 A sunburst-finished Fender Stratocaster with rosewood neck and three single-coil pickups.

Fender and Fender-Style Guitars

Fender-style electric guitars are fashioned after the iconic **Fender Stratocaster** and **Fender Telecaster** model instruments, and are characterized by their use of **single-coil pickups** (magnetic devices underneath the guitar's strings that act as transducers, converting vibrations into electrical signal). Fender-style guitars have a very bright, nuanced, and shimmering tone that is perfect for funk, blues, R&B, country, and Americana. Often, musicians tasked with replicating a full palette of guitar sounds with one instrument will opt for a versatile Fender Stratocaster. Fender-style instruments are also made by companies such as Shur, Tom Anderson, and G & L.



Fig. 1.4 A Fender Telecaster with maple neck and two single-coil pickups.

Gibson and Gibson-Style Guitars

Gibson and Gibson-style guitars are based on such iconic Gibson models as the **Les Paul**, **Explorer**, and **SG**. Gibson-style guitars are characterized by their use of **humbucker pickups** (two reverse-polarity magnets designed to "buck" the unwanted humming noise single coil pickups often make due to alternating current). Gibson and Gibson-style guitars have a thick, full sound that make them an excellent choice for hard rock, punk, and heavy metal. Hollow-body Gibson and Gibson-style guitars with humbucker pickups are also a popular choice among jazz and fusion guitarists. Gibson-style instruments are also made by companies such as Ernie-Ball/Music Man and Paul Reed Smith.



Fig. 1.5 A re-issue of a 1959 Gibson Les Paul with two covered humbucker pickups.



Fig. 1.6 A black Gibson SG. The SG was popularized by AC/DC's Angus Young and Black Sabbath's Tony Iommi.

THE AMPLIFIER

The original guitar amplifiers were designed for use with Hawaiian lap-steel guitars and relied on vacuum tube circuitry. (Note: amplifiers are usually just referred to as “**amps**” and will be referred to as such from here.) In the '50s and early '60s, the popularity of rock'n'roll, blues, and surf music prompted the mass production of guitar amplifiers by companies such as Fender and Vox. During this era, many guitarists



discovered that turning up the volume of a tube amplifier would often cause a desirable fuzzy clipping or breaking-up of the sound called **overdrive**. Listen to the guitar intros to the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" and The Kinks "You Really Got Me" to get a feel for the sound of an overdriven tube amp from the early '60s.

Fig. 1.7 A re-issue of a 1965 2x12" Fender Twin "Blackface" combo amp. Original Fender amps made before the company was sold to CBS in 1965 had a black face panel as opposed to a silver one on later models. The blackface-panel models are generally considered more desirable by collectors.

In the late '60s, amp manufacturers like Marshall and Mesa Boogie began building units with separate preamp stages that allowed players to add more overdrive into their signal before it was sent to the power amp stage for amplification. The smooth, warm sustained sounds produced by these amps would be a catalyst for the pioneering lead guitar innovations of Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix and many others.

By the early '70s, the guitar had become the iconic instrument of choice for soloists aspiring to virtuosity and increased self-expression, assuming a comparable role to that of the saxophone in jazz and the violin in classical music. This emerging breed of innovative guitarists were constantly exploring ways to create new sounds and techniques with their instruments. For instance, Jimi Hendrix's masterful performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner" at the 1969 Woodstock music festival, using a Fender Stratocaster plugged into overdriven Marshall amplifiers, is an excellent example of this innovative and artistic approach.

During the '70s, many amps were engineered to produce an exceedingly affected and distorted sound that added even more breakup than overdrive. Moderate distortion sounds characterized much of the music of bands like Led Zeppelin, Van Halen, and Black Sabbath. From the '80s onward, extremely distorted sounds were being utilized by metal artists like Metallica, Iron Maiden, and Slayer. Despite continued advances in technology and the availability of inexpensive transistor (also known as solid-state) amps and digital sound modeling software, most professional guitarists still use amps based on vacuum tube technology (known as tube amps), as they are generally considered to provide the truest, warmest sound reproduction.

Amplifiers come in two main configurations: **combo amps** and **stand-alone amps**. Combo amps include the preamp, poweramp, and speaker all in one unit, much like a portable boom-box. The Fender Twin and the Vox AC30 are classic examples of combo amps.



Stand-alone or “piggy-back” amps have a head containing a preamp and power amp that is separate from its speaker cabinet, much like a component stereo system. A Marshall JCM800 or 1959SLP “Plexi” head paired with a 4x12 (four 12” speakers) cabinet is a popular example of a piggy-back amp setup.

Fig. 1.8 A Marshall “half-stack” consisting of a 50 Watt Plexi-style head (so named because of the Plexiglas used on the faceplate of the original models) and a 4x12 speaker cabinet.

WATTAGE AND SPEAKERS

Amps are rated for volume and power by **wattage**, but ratings can be inconsistent from brand to brand. When it comes to wattage, more does not necessarily equate to better. Many players find they get the best tone with a lower-wattage amp turned to a higher volume. Other factors influencing loudness include speaker efficiency and whether the amp is built with tube, solid-state, or hybrid (meaning both elements of tube and solid state) circuitry.

Unlike regular audio or PA speakers, guitar speakers are not full range speakers—they cut off some low and high sound frequencies. This is favorable trait, however, as it provides much of the guitar’s distinct midrange sound. The most popular speaker size for guitar amps is 12” in diameter, although 10” diameter speakers are also fairly common. For the guitarist carrying their own equipment to and from performances, a 15- to 30-watt combo amp with a 12” speaker that can be mic’d through a PA system is usually adequate.

DIALING IN A SOUND

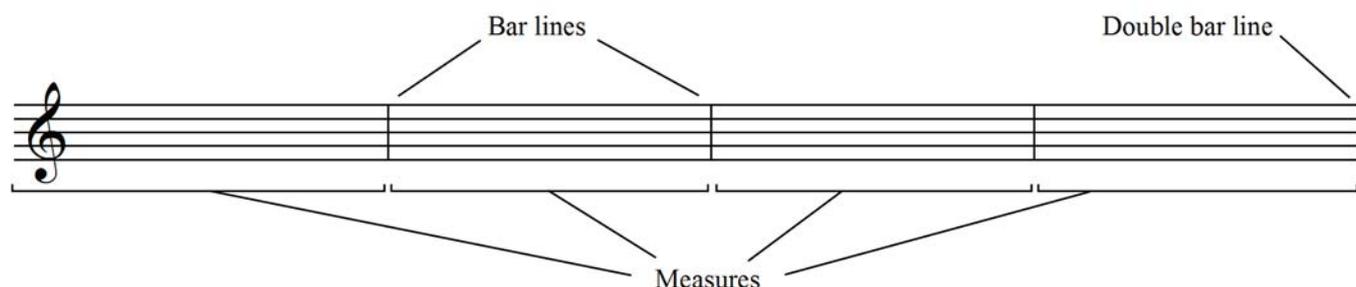
Knowing what sounds are appropriate to use for what style of music, and also knowing how to quickly dial in these sounds is essential knowledge all electric guitarists should possess. Extremely clean tones work great for jazz, funk, disco/R&B grooves, or ballads. Country and blues rock often require a grittier, more overdriven tone. Classic, punk and modern rock generally sound good with a fair amount of distortion, while heavy metal almost always demands an extremely saturated sound.

Most amplifiers will have knobs that allow you to tweak different parameters such as bass, midrange, and treble, but the two main controls are the “gain” knob (often labeled as “drive,” “distortion” or “saturation”) and the master volume knob. Use the gain knob to set the amount of distortion/overdrive and the master volume to control the overall volume. Setting the gain high and the master volume low will allow heavily distorted tones to be generated at low volumes. This is often necessary in practice and studio settings.

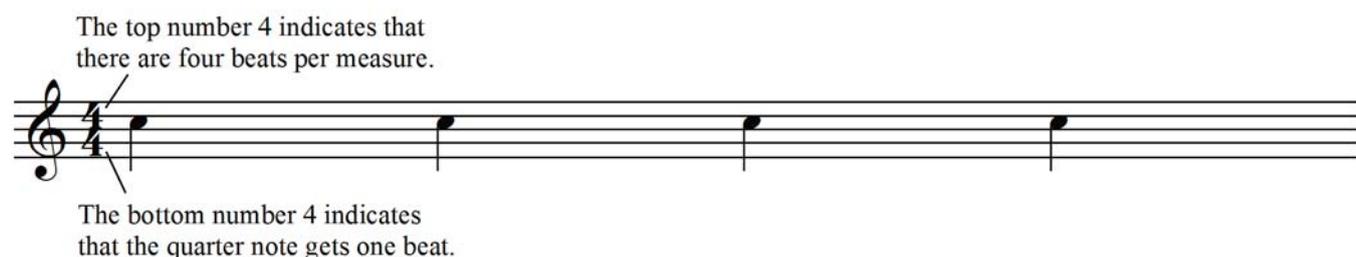
Finding the right tone can be tricky and require practice and experience. It is vital that guitarists listen to their tone in the context of the other ensemble instruments. A tone that sounds warm and balanced by itself can easily be perceived as sounding too muddy or dark when paired with a bassist and drummer.

Chapter 3: Time and Counting Concepts

Steadily recurring pulses in music are commonly referred to as **beats**. Each beat represents a note value and multiple beats are grouped into **measures**, which are the basic units of division in music. The following example shows a bar of four measures divided by **bar lines**. The end of a section or phrase is marked by a **double-bar line**.



The number of beats in each measure is determined by the **time signature**. The time signature is written out as a fraction, where the top number represents the number of beats per measure and the bottom number represents the note value of each beat. Shown below is 4/4, the most common time signature for pop- and rock-styled music, divided up into four quarter notes with each quarter note receiving one beat.



Multiple measures are usually grouped into longer units, called **phrases** or **cycles**. In the performance of popular music, it is very common for these phrases to be four or eight measures in length. Being able to count and feel the most common phrase lengths is an essential skill for all musicians.

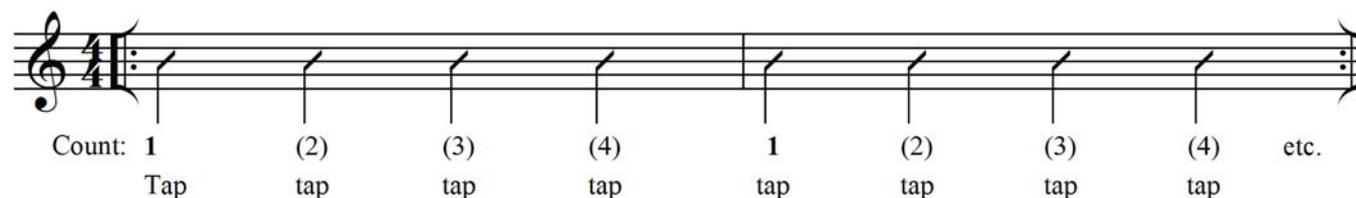
We will begin by simply counting quarter notes in common time. A quarter note receives one beat (Note: Refer to Guitar Reading 1 for a more complete explanation of time signatures and note values).

Ex. 1.1



Next, tap your foot on each beat, but only count the first beat of each measure aloud.

Ex. 1.2



EIGHTH NOTES, UPBEATS, AND DOWNBEATS

The eighth note receives half a beat, and is therefore half the length of a quarter note. Eighth notes are often grouped in pairs totaling up to one beat. (Remember, a quarter note is equal to one beat so two eighth notes are equivalent to one quarter note; $1/8 + 1/8 = 1/4$.)

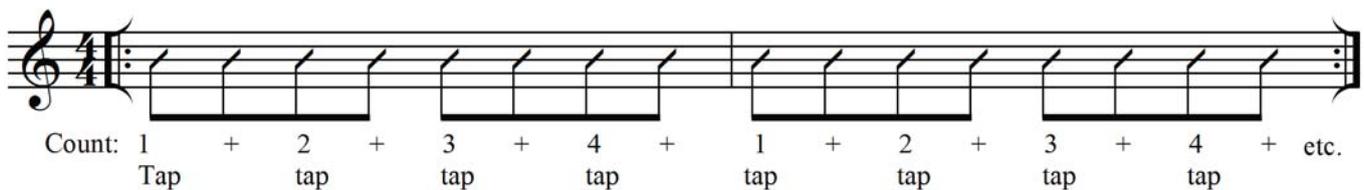


To count eighth notes, we must **subdivide** each beat into two parts. This is done by counting the word “and” in between each beat of the bar, as in “one-and-two-and-three-and-four-and.” When writing out counts, the symbol “+” is frequently used as shorthand for “and.” When playing a steady eighth note rhythmic guitar pattern, it’s not uncommon to put slightly more emphasis on the downbeats than on the upbeats to create a more natural feel.



Count eighth notes while tapping your foot only on the numbers.

Ex. 1.3



This represents the most common way to mark time while playing : tapping your foot on only the quarter note. The quarter notes (or numbers) are referred to as **downbeats**, and the eighth notes (or “ands”) are referred to as **upbeats**.

THE BACKBEAT

The backbeat refers to the extra emphasis given to beats two and four in most popular music. In most contemporary styles, including all forms of blues, rock, and R&B, the backbeat is played by the drummer on the snare drum. In certain styles of music, the snare drum backbeat is nearly as loud as the melody. In jazz, the backbeat is less defined and is often played by the drummer on the hi-hat. Being able to feel the backbeat is an essential skill, even if the guitar part is playing a counter-rhythm to it.

To develop a feel for the backbeat, try counting on all four beats but only clapping on beats two and four.

Ex. 1.4

